the tide pushes a lot of monsters

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by chaparral_crown

Summary

Beau Graham has a boy, one that these days is all his to raise, and all his responsibility if he messes that up. He’s told it’s a task people have been doing for thousands of years without incident, but Beau Graham thinks that none of them had a child like Will.

The raising of Will Graham, and the type of person it takes to raise Will Graham.

Set in "each according to its kind" timeline, but can stand alone.

Notes

Nobody needed this but me, but here it is anyway.

This is the amalgamation of my notes on Beau Graham's character, and generally how I think of Will as a child and young adult coming into his own. This can be read independently of "each according to its kind", but it very much is written with it in mind and memory, and I actually REALLY recommend reading this one after it as supplementary if you want to read both.

It’s a little detail - filled out at need, usually forgotten.

Emergency Contact. An obligatory form item added by some soft-hearted person who has the sense to look around the room and ask “who should we call?” when someone’s gone and shat the proverbial bed, or whatever shape their indignity is taking that day. Dropped a hitch line on your foot. Cut by an engine belt. Arm stuck in the pot line, and the reel bringing the line in whining that it wanted you to come closer, get warm, *get real cozy*. Had one too many drinks on too long a night and tried to go in for work anyway, and your boss says “someone come drive ‘dis drunk sum’bitch home”.

Beau always calls his son, when he can - from ten years old and onwards, as soon as he’s tall enough to see over the dash of a rusting wind blue Ford Bronco. Little Will Graham, skinny, big-eyed, big-eared, and so polite that no one asks him if he should be driving at all. His daddy’s a drunk, and a drifter, and the slow roll in the car from one side of town through three street lights from the warehouse docks to home isn’t worth fussing to the boy about when there’s so much else Beau leaves on his plate. It’s more effective than calling the cops - Beau might actually go home or to the urgent care without a fight if Will comes. “No rushin’,” Beau tells him over the office line, and he imagines more than he sees the nodding head and the familiar nervous frown, and Will always comes.

People don’t really call Beau to do the same. Not even Will unless he absolutely has to, for all that Beau’s name is written down like a courtesy nod. Beau forgets that it is, and he suspects Will does too.

(*You’re not in the habit of offering help, and Will’s not in the habit of asking for it.*)

It’s a miracle that someone is able to call Beau at all, when the time comes; he doesn’t think he’s paid the bill this month. It’s one of those things that Beau doesn’t have the money or the patience to keep up with, and anyone who really wants to get a hold of him that he wants to be found by knows where to find him.

The sun's not up yet when the old white acrylic phone rings on the kitchen counter of the little one bedroom apartment. Beau almost doesn't take the call - nothing reasonable happens at 4 am.

He wakes in slow steps, receiver buzzing in its cradle. Somebody's gone and called out, Beau thinks, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. They've towed his car and the plate's been run, and he's out another $267 arbitrary fucking dollars. That bastard down in Freeport has figured out where he lives, and now he's got to fix him right up a second time. Each possibility, worse than the last, rolls into his head with the buzzing chasing behind it.

Beau answers the phone.

(*You wince at the old memory, the throbbing in your throat as your foreman pulls you into the fluorescent wash of the office with suspiciously timid hands, passed to controller, passed to receiver: "Graham - police on th' horn for you." "Go home when you's done, Beau. Ain't nothin' important t'do here." "Mr. Graham, there's been an accident.*)

(*You hear it again. It crackled, when you picked it up off the desk. "Mr. Graham, there's been an accident."*)

Beau blinks the moment away.

"Is this Beau Graham?" asks a young woman on the other side of the line - today, not twenty-something years ago. Maybe she just has a young voice. Maybe she's a debt collector, and they've picked her up because she sounds young, and old bitchy men like Beau don't like to scream at them, but Beau knows a lot of those kinds, and they scream at anyone.

Not him of course. He's lived that life - the person who gets screamed at.

"Who's askin'?" he asks, palming at the counter for a pack of cigarettes. He's not supposed to smoke inside the building, but it's too early to think straight, especially sober, and if he can hold something in his hand, maybe all the sounds will come together into a shape that makes sense. He won't have to think about it anymore. Beau doesn't want to be sober for that either.

“I’m calling on behalf of Officer Graham - this number is listed as his emergency contact?” She asks it like a question, puts the ball in his court to decide if he wants to take this call.

But it’s not really a question, no matter her tone.

“I’m not like you,” Will had said once, and looking at him in his officer blues - just as round eyed as his momma, every bit the delicate cheeked thing that Beau has shuddered at the image of purpling under someone’s fists, gone red with blood. He’s proud of his son’s achievements. He’s afraid of where they put him.

“Sure, son,” Beau said, too busy trying to take offense to take notice of the whys. “You ain’t like me.”

Will doesn’t drink. Will never misses a day of academy. Will is careful to mind his exposed feet and fingers, more clever with his fishing hooks and power drills than Beau is. Will doesn’t need rides home to sleep off his benders, or ferry him from work site to urgent care, shin shattered with the impact of a ship’s boom because he’s not *paying attention*. And because Will Graham isn’t like Beau, Beau feels terror at the idea of a call from his dispatcher, asking for help.

“Yeah, this is his daddy,” he says, and swallows around his anxiety. “Tell me where at, and I’ll be there.”

“Why didn’ you shoot?” Beau asks from the visitor’s chair.

(*Long drive, long wait, long time to go without knowing if the surgery is over, if you made it in time, if it’s worse than you thought, if they’ll let you see him, if they’re going to tell you not to look, it’s worse than they could fix.*)

Will, staring into the ceiling tiles of his room, says in a tight voice that Beau knows hides tears he is... not ashamed of, but secretive with, yes, Will is a secretive child grown into to a man that doesn't like to share:

"He was sad, and I was too."

(*And that's the whole problem, isn't it?*)

Beau Graham has a boy.

It wasn't really a choice - but then Beau hasn't really ever understood people who choose those kinds of things, anymore than he understands people who roll to a standstill, the kind that set up shop and never move along. Children make sense in that context, he supposes, the way that planting a garden that won't fruit for several years does. No, he doesn't have *patience* for that.

(*A half truth; you have plenty of patience. What you don't have is a natural fear of what happens when you decide to lose it. What's another city amongst the dozens you've settled and left, or another job when you've always worked season to season anyway?*)

But the joke's on Beau. Patience isn't necessary to become a parent, only a few bad decisions.

Shame washes him up in New Orleans. Beau Graham is a rough young-leaning-old man in the last year of his twenties when he comes to call on a bright eyed pretty thing between service in the military and service on a fishing vessel that's scheduled to head out into the gulf.

Other Than Honorable Discharge , they told him when he got his walking papers, and that he should be happy to have it. Beau thinks this is bullshit - he didn't leave his post, he didn't betray anyone, and he certainly didn't do anything that merits expulsion. He went to a bar and finished a fight someone else began, because that's what Beau does when he's social, or he's happy, or on the other side of the coin when he's unhappy. Beau drinks, and Beau fights.

(*"Ahab is fo' ever Ahab," you mumble between burps and the sour taste in your mouth that follows the metallic one of your split upper lip, eying the younger serviceman. He is stupid with liquor, and the mark of your fist beaten into the right temple of his head, and doesn't understand what you're saying. "'Twas rehearsed by thee an' me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates' lieutenant, I act under orders."*)

(*You have elegance in recitations that your own native Mississippi drawl doesn't afford your waking, dry hours. Your hand hurts, but your mouth is alive with books, and you pound out a life by their works. When you are not active duty or on call, you have Mohave deserts to cross. You have whales to chase. You're going to die a miserable bastard, but you'll have joy in literature from the sleeping quarters to the shipyards, whenever you find yourself stuck in one place.*)

Bright eyes is a local girl, inclined to giggle, and shares drinks with him like they're forever friends. She is...effervescent. She shines, interjecting at weird times with her own strange observances, admiring Beau's knuckles and his gnarled hands. She speaks in a poetry of crude truth that speaks to *him*, like he is meant to hear it. Evie, she tells him to call her. Only the abbess and her mémé call her by her full name, when she's hard to handle.

"Why you hangin' on a lush like me, still smellin' like pier water?" he asks her, rocks glass sweating in his hand.

"I like the shape of your face, *c'est tout*," Evie says with a wide eyed grin over loud music, the bright blue of them hard to look directly at for too long. Her mouth doesn't stumble through an accent - it's been educated right outta me, she whispers when they move to dance outside in the temperate damp of the evening. He doesn't know how to dance, but he flexes his feet like he's on a ship, and it serves its purpose well enough. "A handsome Roman marble. Kind of tired and worn down, like the paint's gone and peel'd off with time."

She twirls herself. She kisses with bites. She tries to turn her skin red with the stubble on his face. Beau fancies himself enchanted by a mermaid, with big lazy brown curls for a net to

tangle him in. She grounds him so deep into the shores of Louisiana that he doesn't think to check if he's stuck until he really is.

She is eighteen, and he, twenty-eight, is ignorant of that until she is pulling tiny fists against her collarbone and girls school shirt lapels weeks later. Evie - Evelyn - She insists that she'll never speak to him again if he doesn't do right by her. But now she is sullen, and red around the edges of her bright eyes instead of laughing, and Beau doesn't know what to do.

(*You can't fix this with fists. You could if you were a worse man than you are, but you* ***can't***.)

"I ain't one 'fer threats," he says, staring at his hands which lay downward from his knees. "I ain't one 'fer babies neither."

"Well you *get one*," she thunders with a voice that's too big for her body, wrathful, and shaping herself into a nest that she can take with her anywhere. "*Je voulais pas m'obstiner,*" comes after in tears, only for herself.

He can't tell her no - she doesn't live with him, she doesn't try to move in with him, and her parents still decide how she gets to and from her classes. The seminary decides how she becomes a mother. They both frown at him when she visits. They hope he will disappear with the next big oil rig, or with the snapper in the gulf, but Evie insists that she loves him and that they're meant to all be together.

The only thing Beau decides is by accident of biology: that it's a boy.

So Beau Graham has a boy, because that's the fate that washes up with him.

Having a child changes Beau, but not because it settles him. He still gets up to leave for days at a time on the water, or hours spent in the dry docks, scratching at small living things that cling to the hulls of boats. Some crumble under his hand. Others drag, unwilling to be parted

from the wood and fiberglass. Beau doesn't pretend to sympathize - all practicality, no feelings about it. He has his first drink by 4 pm, either sitting on the business end of a pier, or at the bar near the house on Kerlerec where his baby is waiting. He doesn't drink at the Fuselier residence. That's not the done thing at that time - drinking in front of his child, anymore than hitting women to be able to push off from the dock is.

(*At that time, itches the past tense, and eventually the shame of it falls away as the time does.*)

Day in and day out, the routine persists: *"Faire attention! Mind his head."* Beau does.

William Sawyer Graham, so written next to his name Beau William Graham like a proclamation on the little slip of white paper from the hospital. He signs it because they tell him he should, like it's a deed to a house, and not taking possession of a person. He almost doesn't - just walks out of the maternity ward, still smelling like brine, unattached and unfettered.

Beau holds him like someone holds flowers they don't want crushed, where Evie and her mother are more casual. He envies their practical handling - he's too afraid there's still grease on his hands, or the calluses bother him.

Will's an easy baby for the most part, with an inclination to sleep, and takes a bottle from Beau even though Beau doesn't know what he's doing, but he startles at raised voices and doesn't come down from that fear with the same ease. Evie and Beau aren't so good at avoiding that. Beau keeps his temper when he's sober, and puts it on a leash when he's not. Evie does neither. It's mostly empty threats, dealt out without thinking.

"We don't *need* anybody, he and I. You can just get back to your boat. You're no help anyway."

"I don't want you here, I don't want to be here, what would you even do if we just left?"

"I got places I can go - I got family in Ville Platte. They'll take me and my *bébé*, you'll see."

“You don’t understand, I’m tired - *I’m **tired**. **I’msotiredallthetimeIamsotired.***”

Evie (*“Evelyn,” you hiss, angry and desperate to go back to your room at the boarding house, “Evelyn you’ll wake 'em again,”*) works her way from troubled high school senior to doting mother to spurned lover so quickly, and there’s nothing that makes this simpler for her. The story changes daily. In the next breath, she wants to move in, she wants to get married, she’s ready and she doesn’t want to be in seminary school forever. The sisters are kind and help her with assignments, the sisters are cruel and punish her for becoming a mother outside the anointing of the church. She thinks people are at her windows some days, trying to steal the baby. She thinks Beau is on others. Rarely but more frightening, she forgets she has a baby at all, reading on the couch like a girl half her age.

Will screams on a cushion of a dated couch through this, swaddled tight, arms too tight to his sides to do much other than weep. Beau picks him up sometimes and tries to leave the room, anything to keep from detonating, thinking of the Maine coast, or the Florida Keys, and rocks him the same way he does his mother the first time - back and forth, shifting where his weight feels like it should land. It helps the way being on the water does. Sometimes Beau thinks it’s Will that helps instead of the water.

The bad days come more frequently the longer it goes unaddressed, even after he marries her, and she graduates high school, worse still when they move in together and she moves back out. Beau grits his teeth and makes do. Beau stays in Louisiana long past what he wants, working small jobs he hates, to stay in a small apartment down the road he hardly ever gets to sleep in because even if he isn’t the kind to have babies, he’s not the kind to leave them when he does.

(*Your father did that to you. He didn’t ever want to settle either, and he didn’t. You would rather be chained to a stone in the heart of Jackson Square than do the same to your own son. You don’t know if you did better than him, in many ways you think not. But you were at the very least present and known.*)

She’ll grow out of this, he reasons to himself. We can leave, just as soon as she grows out of this. It’s three years of this thinking that pushes him through. Her eyes are still brilliant. Her smiles are rarer, but still full of clean white bone, and yesterday she was briefly happy - Will’s walking now, and shyly offers things he picks up from the sides of tables and from the ground, and his momma takes them all with a big laughing “*Ça c'est bon, ça va*!”

Beau's grown attached to the idea - the three of them together, just happy somewhere other than here, like it's the place that's the problem instead of the people. He holds Will through this thought, afraid of his weak neck and his curling fingers as an infant, afraid of his wide looks and long hurt silences as a toddler, and hopes he grows out of that too.

He sways Will, and plugs his ears, and promises him they'll leave soon. Better things down the pipeline. Bigger oceans not already overfull with bullshit. It's the problem with attachment - it's hard to tread water when you need to.

Beau would like to tell everyone that it works out, but it doesn't.

"Mr. Graham, there's been an accident. You need to come get your son."

(*Schizophrenia, child or adult onset is never really clear, but she was a child and a woman, and the distinction doesn't really matter. She never comes back from being pregnant, not exactly how she found you in the dewy evening just a few short years before. "Post-partum's a bitch," a co-worker sneers over a decade later, fresh from maternity leave and cutting checks for the blue collars, and you nod and say "a right bitch."*)

Beau does.

(*Closed casket funeral - not enough of her face left to show with it open. You don't attend. Will doesn't either, and you're angry to know her parents prefer it that way. You might be tempted to mention the callousness of keeping firearms around their babies, grand, grown-up, or otherwise.*)

Will doesn't wear officer blues as a detective. "Doesn't make for a very cooperative investigation," he laments once over coffee on an Easter morning visit, one of the few holidays he seems to be able to get off with any frequency as a young professional. "People are afraid of a badge," he adds, blowing smoke from his mouth over the ashtray in the diner - a bad habit he doesn't get from Beau, but his colleagues. "The people who stand to lose the most - those are the ones that I have to get to talk to me."

Beau has mixed feelings about that - relief, to not feel the instinctive need to recoil, well acquainted with law enforcement as a regular problem, but sometimes apprehension, like people won't properly respect that Will has authority. People hesitate to hurt cops. The retaliation for it is too risky. There's no such thing as a fair trial after the public sainting of the fallen, no matter how shitty they are at their job, or if they hit their kids.

Will is neither of these, free of many other sins as well. Beau, probably because he's a father and he knows Will, often tells people his son is the only straight cop on the entire force.

Waiting for him in the front lobby of the hospital as he shuffles discharge papers with his yellow-blue cheek from hitting a wall and the stilted tight motions of his arm, Beau still thinks the same. Will makes his statements to investigators after surgery. He thanks all his nurses. He takes calls from his division captain and the chief of police with his quiet timbre, becoming more like his father's as he gets older. He's gravelly.

"Ready to go?" Will asks him, like he's the one with the car keys.

"Shit, I thought they'd never let'cha leave," Beau snorts, still in his clothes from three days ago.

He doesn't thank Beau for coming, but that's not the relationship they have, and Will's smart enough to know it. In his white t-shirt and jeans, this is the same kid that's bailed him out a dozen times in two years, and slept in a cot when the rooms were too small for an old bastard and his child, and went about three months separating out meat from his dinner plate because if he thought too hard about it, his mouth hurt to eat it.

Of course Beau was coming, and god damn if he's going to be thanked for doing the bare minimum.

Beau Graham has a boy, one that these days is all his to raise, and all his responsibility if he messes that up. He's told it's a task people have been doing for thousands of years without incident, but Beau Graham thinks that none of them had a child like Will.

Will is a good child, all things considered. Quiet, polite, painfully clever in a way that Beau hasn't ever really hoped to match wits to when he's grown to adulthood, but now while he's still shy of the hallway lights being turned off, and shuffles his feet with a downward look when he's caught sneaking into the kitchen in the mornings to turn on a small tube tv that makes the rounds with them, he is Beau's baby still.

He's not normal though. Far from it.

It's little quirks at first that come to mind when a doctor asks him when the issues started - Beau doesn't even have to think about it very hard. (*You knew when you saw it, sure as watching a cloud roll in, that there would be rain.*) Will watches cartoons like his peers, eyes dancing to follow bright colored characters with a mindless delight, but his face changes from frame to frame. He smiles and cries with the stories. He does this well past being told it's all pretend.

"You's fine," Beau gruffs with a cup of coffee on a Saturday morning, and wipes the tears from the corners of Will's eyes with a rough thumb. He tries not to work on them anymore - too hard to find a sitter, and five's still too young for Will to watch himself, even with the neighbor peeking in on him. "'Nothin' t' fuss for. Show's over, th' rabbit's fine."

Will scratches at his face, rubbing his arm across it. "Sorry," he hiccups, and breathes in fast three times watching Beau. "He was jus' *gone*." The sadness melts away from his face to be replaced by Beau's scowl.

“‘Nothin’ t’ be mad ‘bout neither,” Beau says and tries to smirk instead, tickling his sides. The scowl melts into a shy smile. Will’s as mercurial as spring showers, like a wind kicked up and died down in cycles, moods buoyed and dropped as quickly. “You gotta be thicker skinned.”

“Sorry,” he says again, “my skin’s kinda thin.”

He does this with animals on the sidewalk. (*“I think that dog s’afraid,” he mourns and looks to you to fix it.*) He does this with strangers in the store. (*“It’s not th’ right kind,” he rages from next to the butcher’s counter, a perfect mirror of the man served just before them.*) He does this to his Kindergarten teacher. (*Will’s a wonderful helper,” she coos, and Will smiles beautifically beside her, glowing and pink cheeked, and every bit as giggly as the curly haired thing that traps you in the humid hot gloom of New Orleans.*)

But the worst of it is when he matches Beau.

He’s careful what he shows. It’s no business of a five year old’s to see an unaccomplished man in his thirties pull at rapidly greying hair and throw around statements and bills that he’s just started being able to read but never really understands. It’s certainly not the business of sons to watch their fathers turn to a glass of something that would peel paint to help them sleep at night. He’s boiling in his unspent anger - he’s waiting for the next straw to fall. Shitty jobs, poor pay, the indignity of food stamps, and petitioning for worker’s compensation for a broken thumb, and faceless in-laws sending Will a card with a puppy on the front for his birthday and a fresh twenty dollar bill from the bank.

(*You won’t spend it. You won’t. You want to, you think you’d like to change the timing belts in the Bronco with it and have enough left to stop by the bar before picking Will up from the after school care before it closes at 4:30 tomorrow, but you won’t.*)

Will’s supposed to be in bed for those times.

“Daddy?” asks Will one night. His hands hold the edge of the hallway, very white on the wood paneling of the single-wide they’re renting in Biloxi. Beau very nearly scolds him for it, but he’s wet-faced and red in the eyes the way he is when nightmares chase him from his sleep.

“You’ supposed t’ be in bed, son,” Beau sighs, and billows cigarette smoke like he’s a car engine himself. When he reaches up to push an ache in his forehead away, he’s embarrassed to see his hands come away wet too. He looks at it, resting on his thumb and forefinger - it persists. It will be salty if he puts it to his mouth.

“How long you been there?” he asks instead to occupy his tongue.

Will doesn’t answer, little fist raised to his mouth, but Beau knows the answer is a while.

(*“He rested sitting on the un-stepped mast and sail, an’ tried not to think but only to endure,” you read when you tuck him back into bed with a book in hand, looking at the familiar dark brown curling hair and the blue eyes creasing with sleep and the remnants of sticky tears above the quilt, and you fill with* ***doubt****.*)

Beau doesn’t seek help for Will’s sensitivity at first. Kids are sensitive. It’s one of the first things he’s told, picking Will up from a fall in the park by an older woman who insists he’s fine, he’s fine, and the tears don’t come like Beau expects. It’s not a problem, he insists, and it’s certainly not something that they can afford to make into one.

“There’s programs for kids like Will,” says the pediatrician, watching delicately from her seat in the clinic as Will swings between calm and the isolated hysteria of children receiving booster shots, tired with fevers, fear of the nurses and doctors. They came in for tetanus vaccines - too much rust in their house and in the dockyards to not mind that sort of thing. They instead receive a kindly-meant lecture that makes Beau want to take that clipboard from her hand and smash it against the counter until it is sawdust.

“Special classes, more compassionate learning -” she continues.

“What, like some kinda *retard*?” Beau barks, not wanting to hear the rest.

There’s a moment of awkward silence, in the room and from outside it.

Will’s face darkens to twin him, but with it comes shame. Beau smooths his mouth out and takes pamphlets for the state health services with the same frustration of a parking citation. The pediatrician watches him more than Will as this is done.

(*What does she expect? For you to hit him? Hit her? That this is your fault, and your son is trying to survive you? The gumption of such a thought turns your stomach - you panicked the first time Will burns himself on the stove top, like it had burned you instead, and you forget what you’re supposed to do other than hold his hand under running water. You repeat this with bruises from tripping, scrapes from the wooden tie-offs, and nightmares that you don’t know if there’s any helping them. You don’t know how to heal him from his reactionary nature, or if this is something you heal at all, and you feel sick at that admission, a failure.*)

“We’ll figure out somethin’,” he tells Will later with a sigh. Will’s swinging his legs in the bench seat, a habit that will turn to foot tapping in middle school, and cracking his neck as an adult - he nods, hair bouncing. He’s anxious from elementary school clear up to his thirtieth birthday and beyond. Maybe that’s Beau’s fault too.

Today he’s tied his shoes himself this morning, a heaving line knot on each end just like Beau showed him.

“Can we get Dairy Queen?” Will asks cautiously.

A sigh. “Yeah, we’ll get Dairy Queen,” Beau replies. Chicken fried steak sandwiches with strawberry shakes and fries and extra gravy - Beau’s favorite, at Will’s request. He hopes Will wants it because he wants it, and not to make his old man feel better, but Beau knows that’s not the case.

The little gunshot house Will rents is long and largely empty, a far cry from the one that belongs to his grandparents, and by proxy to him down the street.

The Fuseliers keep old things like each deserves a throne, and they are charged as keepers of keepsakes. The walls were wallpapered and ugly, Beau remembers, and an awful nauseating sight between arguments and the smell of mildew and breastmilk. He'd have burned it down if it hadn't been intended to be for Will if he wanted it. He wonders if maybe Will has considered burning it down himself, weird headstone on a dilapidated block of a big street that it is. He certainly never tries to live in it.

No, Will's house is sterile for the most part, albeit not on account of the landlady who is fond of him - thrift shop couch against the wall with a reading lamp and a throw over the arm, well used with the little square side table Will uses as a desk pulled up to its edge. There's one bedroom with a tightly made bed in its center, and one bathroom that you can turn in and that's about it. He doesn't need more than that. Sure, he keeps up with his fishing supplies, and he goes to the grocery store for food that he knows how to make but often forgets, but Beau thinks he keeps the space clear to have somewhere to rest, **really** rest.

"Coke or water, daddy?" asks Will in front of the refrigerator.

"Whiskey," Beau replies with a wiry smile. "But a soda water'll do jus' fine."

"You know Bill's is still down the street, right?" Will continues like Beau never said anything, but hands over a sweating can that is cold enough to burn. "Three days in the hospital means not much to eat here - might want to get a couple sandwiches or something. I've still got to do the interview with the union shrink."

"Y'should tell 'em you need more money," Beau says with a shrug, snapping the can open. "Can't be good at your job if they ain't gonna pay you like it, discountin' the crackheads and psychos."

(*You both wince - different reasons.*)

Will pours himself a glass of water. He shuffles through paper bag after paper bag of medications - one sleep aid, a blood thinner, two different types of muscle relaxers, and one sedative. *That* his son stares at like it has teeth. He's been through a few over the years. He knows all their loathsome names.

"I'm gonna tell them I need to leave the force," Will says, turning the brown bottle in hand. "Go back to school, try something a little different. I need to find something where I can still be myself."

Fair, Beau thinks but never replies. It's a man's business to chart a course for himself, and his grown son doesn't need validation. Looking at stacks of case files, and the scattering of them on countertops and couch tables, it's likely that Will is stuck in everyone else's. They are bad ends written in typewriter and polaroids. None have a destination, and that is where they will go even if solved - nowhere.

(*You are relieved, and you'd never ask Will to validate that you are right to be so.*)

Beau Graham has a boy, and it's not all terrible, even when it feels like that.

By age seven, Will does all his homework without prompting, and knows how to make a grilled cheese with an electric griddle after school, so if Beau's late he doesn't go hungry. It's cheap, and he likes it, and that works out because the winter months aren't good for money at the docks, especially now that Beau can't work off-shore for long.

He waits up for his daddy to come through the door, the neighbors still checking on him from over a shared chain-link fence. They have dogs that Will pets through the fence - both he and Beau like them, mixed color mutts with bright eyes and wide smiling mouths. He wants to ask how Beau's day was, and carefully talks about his.

(*He doesn't tell you anymore when he gets in trouble for his moods, and you wouldn't punish him even if he did. You'll get a letter, or a call that you rarely answer because you're not home, and will forget about it until the next time it happens.*)

He wants to watch all of Beau's favorite shows. He wants to be nearby. He settles into the sagging loveseat next to his father and stays up until bedtime which he goes to without complaint when Beau can't stand to sleep without a tumbler of something strong, and lets Beau read him more Hemingway, and Defoe, and Stevenson until all his nights are filled with pirate's treasure and marlin.

"Will you show me how t' catch one someday?" he asks one day. "Miss Bernice next door says you know how to. On the charters."

Beau wipes his hands, working at a grease spot. "Got dreams of bringin' back a big'gin? It's a lot of waitin', goin' after fish."

"I have time," Will replies, and with his colt legs and long boy's eyelashes, Beau doesn't doubt it for a second.

Will is a quick study for fishing, delighted by the weights and lures and floats. He has smart little fingers that pluck at knots in Beau's fishing line until the knots unravel and are forgotten, and Will freckles in the sun on the docks with something to fix as Beau does his own work. He learns all the best types of bait fish for all the river and gulf game, and the kinds of birds that eat them so he knows where to look, and sits as patiently as the retirees and old salted hands at the end of the dock with his pole in hand.

He doesn't always catch a lot - too excited at the first tug of the line, prone to breaking it in his haste to bring it back in. The fish on the Biloxi River are too big for a kid's rod from the bait shop, even if the bait is right.

(*He tells you once the fish are scared and he wants it to be over quickly, and you tell him try not to think about that. Crueler things will come up the delta from the sea, and your son is hardly the worst of them.*)

Beau takes him out on a loaner boat into the deltas, and further into the Tchoutacabouffa River instead, where the fish are smaller for hands still learning how to cast and pull in. Will ties his own hooks and chartreuse bait lures, and gives cautious smiles with each two pounder he manages. “Good, good,” says Beau. “Now you jus’ have t’ get ‘em home in one piece.”

Will’s calm on the water, so much so that it becomes a habit to be on it once he stops paying mind to the thrash of the catch. Beau is too, watching herons and cranes in the shallows, dipping sharp mouths into the reeds, families like theirs that travel from the next best place to the next. Five bucks to borrow a friend’s cheap outboard dinghy on a Tuesday, working on cleaning up abandoned ones that his boss lets him keep in empty skiffs that aren’t rented yet. It’s a kinship not easily described by anything other than flocks.

Despite all this, hate is in his skin. It is harder to hide than it used to be.

It’s been near to four years in Mississippi, letting the bay dry out the worst of their wounds, and Beau’s feet are itchy to be gone again. His tongue and his fists are aching for the burn of a (*more - you mean more*) drink and a fight. But his son seems ok, bordering happy when he doesn’t have other people to contend with, only open water. Beau comforts himself with that, and chews the inside of his own maw.

His son seems ok.

(*You’re not. You were fine in a hollow sort of way, up until the dock owner runs his goddamn mouth about how weird Will is.*

“Quiet kid,” he says. “Cried when a bass got a duckling las’ week.” You think you would have forgiven that as small talk had he not escalated week over week. “Real good wit’ his hands, your boy, but not so good ‘bout speakin’ up. He ‘fraid of me? Some kind o’ simple?” “Should make him respect his elders, Graham.”

The day he calls your boy a faggot and a retard in earshot of you, Will doesn’t need a parent to hold his temper. He needs a person who will set the record straight. You called him that in

the doctor's office, and he had to wear that name for someone else to see - called into question his smarts and his capability, and as far as you're concerned, there's nobody allowed to question that, not even yourself.

You set the record straight. You set it so straight that everything surrounding it is crooked. Teeth. Nose. Eyes. And you are so ***relieved****, a levee with no outlet finally breaking in full view of your boy, who watches with awe like he's been struck himself the way you never could do to him, spots on his cheeks so important to you that you draw blood for them.*

So maybe you weren't ok, but you're yourself again now, and suddenly you are.)

The man never presses charges, or comes after him, or ever threatens his job, but there's a notable shift in the wind that drives Beau straight home from work and into a bar on nights that his anger doesn't want to come off with the coveralls and the motor oil. With nothing to keep it back, seems like a waste of time to not indulge it. He'd rather be down the street making an ass of himself than in his living room. Don't drag your dirty laundry across the lawn, he thinks his own momma said once when he was a kid in Mobile. Keep your ugliness private. Beau doesn't give half a shit what random people think, they can see his whole fuckin' ass, but he cares what Will sees of his rotten hide because Will wears it as his own skin, and for a time the drinks come from outside the single-wide. His anger finds a catfish hole at a lounge near to power plant, where a buddy likes to go.

Will accepts this with his usual child-like graces, even if his face is thinning and his limbs getting longer with age. He knows he still needs to do his homework, and eat dinner, and go to bed by nine even if Beau hasn't dragged his sorry ass back. They live in the same relative harmony with their weekends on the water. Will goes to school, and reads Rawls, and London, makes no friends, spends evenings alone, and soon is asking if maybe they can get a dog.

"Just to protect the house," the boy says. (*Just to protect him, you think, and feel nettled at the idea that you aren't doing your job. You are - there are monsters that take advantage of your child's gentle disposition, and only a bigger monster will keep them from coming back, and you are growing back into your scales.*) "The retriever mix down the street is having puppies - Mickey from class said so. We could *buy* one," Will insists with uncommon fervor.

“If we stay,” Beau says, and licks at a spot he’s been worrying at. It’s not good for kids to be alone all the time.

They don’t stay. Beau finds himself on the business end of a folding knife after a tab is miscounted by the barkeeper and his buddy, and Beau asks if his buddy is so certain that it’s wrong, why doesn’t *he* do the math, and it turns out they’re not such great friends after all.

Beau finishes that fight, just like all the others, and lands himself in the county jail to sober up and wait out his nosebleed. In the morning, he misses a shift without calling in. Will runs out of milk for cereal, and has to ask the mother of the kids down the block if she can make a call to the hospital to see if Beau’s washed up there.

(*He tells you about the cereal first - he has a habit of doing that, focusing on a detail instead of the big, flaming disaster in the middle of the room like it’s funny to do it. As a kid it’s shrugged off as weird priorities - as a teenager it’s meant to diffuse you from seeing the thing that will actually make you mad.*)

Beau’s fired. No money means an empty bottle, and an empty bottle means it’s time to go, just like he’s wanted over and over again, and been looking for excuses ever since.

He takes them to Charleston first because there’s a naval yard. He can’t work in the naval yard, but he knows there’s a port of call, and someone comfortable with the engine of a ship that requires one isn’t a common person. He can pal around with the veterans and the active duty members like his dismissal isn’t anything worth talking about so long as there’s money, and a public school that Will can walk to. The apartment isn’t great, not really made for a father and son, but it’s close to the punch in clock, and Beau’s so rarely at home to get in bed that it hardly matters anyway. His twin mattress across from Will’s is almost decorative.

Will is excited, until he isn’t. The teacher doesn’t like Beau, and by extension decides to not like Will. Will telling her that in intricate detail doesn’t improve things, but Beau doesn’t think telling lies is respectable, so his son makes up in spades for his father’s delinquency

between servicing pistons with smart remarks that if he were another crewmember, Beau would smack the shit out of him.

“Your son is troubled,” says the principal. “Have you considered having him assessed?”

“Fer’ what, bein’ a smart ass?” asks Beau, dodging again. That’s not what he’s here for though, not this particular call.

(*As he tells you, your third-grader who breezes through times tables, but trembles through lunches: there’s a school assembly, hundreds of kids packed in like anchovies, greasy little hands and minds pressed together. You hated it, but you’d do fine. Will hates it, and he doesn’t. He is paralyzed with the emotions of children in close quarters that press like fingers, running away from the gym to throw up somewhere outside. “Ariana in first grade - I think someone did something to her,” Will says in the low voice he uses as one at confession. Truthful, but in the awful way that you remember something last minute, something you forgot and wish you hadn’t.*)

That lasts half a school year. Beau’s feet itch again - he doesn’t know if Will’s even there long enough to remember it.

A friend of a friend asks him if he wants to make some quick, union money, and Beau, looking for an excuse for something nicer - two bedrooms, the top shelf, maybe even a yard for the fantasy dog, spoken of like a soon to arrive lost cousin - agrees. The Newark Bay and its confluences are full of shipping containers in a hurry to get in and out, and the two of them have no real allegiances to the South save for his accent that never goes away, and Will’s grandparents who are ready to die and be replaced by Will’s grandparents house that doesn’t require his son to be near it.

(*It sits between the two of you - a ghost ship that you never visit but partially own, and he’s never asked to see but knows is a sad place surrounded by flowers. You took one photo that you give to him. He never asks about it until his placement on the force is decided years later.*)

Well that lasts two years.

The worker housing rent is cheap, the days are written in time clocks and overtime restrictions, the latin food good and plentiful, and summers are sweet on the edge of New Jersey and New York where the Statue of Liberty faces the portworkers of the bay and away from the big city beyond her, standing between them with a rainbow of cargo as a wall. The sun is always in her eyes, and only doesn't wrinkle like Beau's because they had the sense to make her from brass.

Thousands of businesses sprinkle the water's edge for her to frown at.

Beau thinks that maybe there's enough places on the Hudson that he can keep himself busy.

It bothers him that it doesn't last. But the neighbor shoots a man in the street in front of their little book-spine narrow townhouse and Will watches from the front window like it's the Fourth of July, and a little blood and brain spatter on the asphalt is fireworks that he is meant to look at.

"Do you think he shot Herman for something he did, or something he did himself?" Will asks, the red and blue of the patrol cars washing the green from his eyes that gets stronger with time, a tiny way he becomes more like Beau.

"Dunno," says Beau. "But you's should come away from 'dat window. Don't like you gettin' hung up on on somethin' kids ain't supposed t'see."

"I think it was something he did himself," Will continues like Beau says nothing of importance at all. That's getting stronger with time too - the brackish watery color of Beau's eyes coming in with the tide to mingle with his mother's blue, and the ugliness of the small lives around them with it also.

Maybe they'll go somewhere small town and try something new. No confluences to the ocean. Nothing good washes up where the stink of people is thick with reeds and mud, and nothing can swim through it.

Will Graham is all of nearly 26 when he hangs his cap and returns the bright sickle-moon and star badge, officer number all but memorized by Beau, the same way Will's birthday is. He's spent a lot of time reciting both to peace officers while deep in his drinks and with his arms cuffed, so he's had plenty of opportunities to practice saying it right.

Shining up from the pile of dossiers, paperwork, and medical bills, it looks like a jewel. It was hard earned like one, after all. It's the only thing that Will thought of getting out of high school, like his desire for stability would be answered with a desire for justice. He had a big grin when he graduated the academy - top of his class at the time, surprisingly. He borrowed a big voice from his colleagues, Beau suspects. Harder to keep it loud and unfettered by someone's emotion when out on a call, or working someone through a memory they've tried to half-forget. Not big on stability, the inhabitants of Will's poorer district through no fault of their own, just as Will's isn't either. Not very big on justice as much as closed cases, the legal system of the city who is burdened in the aftermath of Katrina and everything that washes up with it.

(*You watch him grow out of that idea, holiday after holiday, until he smokes more furiously than you. You regret that he grows more bitter about it even after retirement, his twinned desires more a mirage than an attainable goal.*)

"I get to keep it," Will shrugs. "Only had to turn in one - bought three others when I kept losing them behind the washer, and that's the only one that survived."

"Gotta have at leas' one t' flash at the peons," Beau says dryly, picking it up to turn over in his hand. "You got some more Officer Grahams strollin' the street? Two ain't here."

"I keep them handy for when I need them," his son replies waspishly. "When are you going home?"

(*When you want to, like any other time you've stopped showing up for work. Will knows that already - he's already called in your rent for next month. It's been two weeks of settling your boy who thinks he wants to do this all himself, but needs the settling. You'll have a new gig by the time you get home, and never speak to anyone from the place before it again. Change is constant in your lives. The only permanent thing for either of you is each other.*)

“Maybe we’ll find one of them for you,” Will continues, stacking the papers and folders neatly into a plastic bag he’s to take to the station. Just a drop off - there’s no party for the retiring Officer Graham, who is “convalescing” and Beau thinks would quite frankly rather have died of his wound than accept a bunch of phony congratulations and imaginary friendships. Better to just not show up one day than deal with all that bullshit. “Seeing how often you used it by proxy. Seems more efficient to let yourself out of a two-day hold instead of calling me from the other fucking side of the gulf to do it.”

“True,” Beau says, and settles himself into the couch, turning a glass of bourbon in hand at 11:00 in the morning on a Wednesday. Will’s choice of drink and Beau’s choice of time. “But you’d forget t’ call if you’s didn’t need to.”

He doesn’t mean anything by the jab - Beau’s self-sufficient. Will is too. They both worked hard to make themselves that way. Why would they want to talk every day? To tell each other what a shit time they had yesterday? Commentary on shopping at the grocery store, or that they drank the same thing this week, and they’ll drink the same next? Beau will be doing the same thing in January that he does in July. The only thing that will change for him is the fishing, and even that’s just the kind that comes up to the shores.

The glass sweats in his hand. Will shuffles papers. They sound like he’s uncertain what he’s supposed to do after all this, even though Beau knows the decision is concrete, but that’s a familiar story too.

Beau Graham has a boy that he doesn’t know how to keep well without keeping him away from everyone, including himself. Probably himself more than any other rotten bastard wandering the edge of the Great Lakes.

They never really settle over three years of that coast’s wandering - Buffalo is too cold for boat work year round, but the transition from New Jersey is simple and comfortable. “We’re exploring our options,” he tells Will, when they box up again. Detroit is too big, full of people jockeying for limited opportunity on a suffering infrastructure, too much like parts of where Beau grew up for Beau to ever feel like doing anything other than want to leave, but

Sandusky is in the middle, a Goldilocks pick out of two extremes. Suburban. Middle-class. He's told it's what he should want, and Beau hates it and its conformity, but a stable year is starting to become something of a rarity with the return of Beau's temper, and needs drive.

Physically, Will ought to be fine. Will's bones are unbroken. He's not prone to colds, and he's had the chicken pox already, and school won't let him in without his vaccinations, so Beau settles that quick enough to break a neck. His teeth are straight.

(*There's not a lot of money for dentistry, that's not some thing you've ever budgeted for in your life - you're a rough nag that's too tough to show more than the stretch of age over your skull, but you work those social programs to let Will have this like a bad card the county keeps drawing - a smile, a manic joy, the ability to dupe young idiots like yourself into dancing while the humidity and sazeracs are on your lips, and make friends that personality might otherwise chase away. A smile gets you somewhere, even if you can't manage anything else, and his momma's was* ***so*** *white.*)

Despite all this, Will is quieter, secretive. He isn't *unhappy*, but he is more often angry and withdrawn than the gentle mouthed baby that used to cry at loud noises. "Just growing into a young man," says the wife of his new boss, cutting Will's curls as a favor to Beau, her white fingers carding through them like she belongs there. She thinks she's *entitled*, Beau guesses, to impart her charity with heavy-handed invitations to dinner or to a luncheon after church and the like. But Will needs his hair cut, and Beau doesn't care to spend five bucks on something that can be handled with clippers and ten minutes of her attention. "All my boys did it when they got to this age. Weren't you the same?"

Beau considers that. Beau Graham is raised in a household by a single woman with flaking hands from hard work, but Beau learns all his anger as a person without direction - not as a child. He doesn't think he was like Will at all, even if these days he'd sooner spit on his mother's grave than pass up a fight. It bothers him that Will's upbringing is a twin to his own, but there's nothing to be done about it. Good intentions be fucked, stable environments be damned. They're migratory birds, or a whale pod of two, and they're doing the best with what they've fucking got.

(*Make do, your mother always said.*)

Will says nothing, and only flinches when she catches him by surprise with a spritz of her hair spray. The folding chair of the waiting room of the office squeaks under his shifting

weight.

Beau does try to talk to him about it, contrary to the wagging mouths of the neighbors. It's easy to catch Will alone on the lake, even if it's not easy to make him talk, but that's ok. Truth is a coal under his son's tongue - he'll spit it out.

They've come to the Bay View Fishing Pier to try their hand against some channel catfish, and to stare into the long stretch of the Edison Bridge, lights still dim next to the brilliance of the sun. It's less of a pier than a long breakwater with broken concrete and the guileless determination of green things that want to grow, but it's balmy, and safe, and on a Tuesday evening in the latest part of the summer, it's fairly quiet. People with money will go to the amusement park. People with time but not much money will come here.

It's just past 7 pm, and Erie is still casting yellow and golden sunlight from its waters in the summer heat and hiding Will's eyes in a squint. They're hiding Beau's too, but Beau is always squinting, because everything is bright and blinding when you spend your days at night. The long days of the Northern states aren't new to Beau, but he's forgotten them.

Both cast towards the bridge. They've bloodied their fingers with chicken livers, hands brackish-red like they've dipped them into old oil, and for a long time they don't talk. It seems a shame to ruin the calm with chatter, but Beau's been told he's the adult. He should try.

"Haven't asked for nothin' for school yet," Beau hedges. It's true - Will hasn't, but Will rarely does. He informs. *It's time to get notebooks*, he'll say, *just need five bucks and to bike to the corner store.* He's never been embarrassed by no new lunchboxes, or novelty pencils, and he doesn't waste things. There's not a way to be grateful for that without Beau embarrassing *himself* instead, so Beau never remarks on it - just gives him a twenty instead and tells him to keep the change, which Will ferrets away. "Y'hemmed it up nice last year. Would like t'get you's somethin' special for eighth grade. Las' year before startin' over again wit' the high school, yeah?"

"It's fine," Will says mildly, frowning. "Not like I'm making an *impression*," he stressed, the same way Beau does every time there's a new school. "I've already made *that* without new

shoes, or whatever."

Beau snorts. "Kids don't have t' respect you. They jus' have t' know what you're about."

"I don't know what that is."

(*That's true - Will is sullen, Will is interested in baseball, Will is sullen again until the next friend's energy takes him over, and you come in with the practical "but is it what you* ***want****?" and a frustrated peace settles over him. The spell is broken - you think of Odysseus landing in Ithaca once more, and promises to be the closest to the Odysseus that his family remembers, but never the same, and Will becomes more and more withdrawn from his peers while you watch.*)

(*Do living things grow without the sun they're grown under? Watching him cast a reel, you know the answer is no, intentional or otherwise. Your kid just doesn't always know what direction it's coming from - upwards, westwards, inside.*)

Beau doesn't really want to say what comes next. It sours and hurts his mouth, and all the words are bee stings, but it comes out anyway like songs that get stuck in your head.

"I'm told there's...programs, if you're interested," he says. "Through the school - jus' someone t' talk to that could help that y' don't have t' share a home with, or buys you shoes."

"What, and *that's* my something special?" Will asks, lightning sharp, and Beau knows he recognizes the phrase.

"*No*," Beau drawls, long, upwards, and considering like there's more reeds here than he's used to, and the shore is changing shape year over year, and that maybe someday he won't recognize his son anymore. "I ain't tried to fix somethin' I didn' think I knew how to. I'm not 'bout t'start tellin' you how t'fix 'dis one. But you sound sometimes like it's somethin' you'd like fixed. Goin' fishing ain't fixin' it."

“It’s ok,” Will shrugs.

“It’s really not, son.”

That skips out on the water ahead of them, little flat stones that leave their reels and sink somewhere into Lake Erie, forgetting the sun that was on them until they are cold. They pull in their hooks. They cast out new bait. The twilight comes to steal the gold from the sky with it’s blue-violet and pink.

Will chews on his lip for a while after that. He pulls in two catfish, both bigger than Beau’s, and deftly handled like a man instead of a kid moving a child’s weak hands, turning the reel as if he means to pull himself in with the smooth-skinned fish, completely at ease with the night’s dark, and setting aside whatever troubles him for the task at hand.

Beau hopes that he enjoys it. Beau hopes it so much that he buys him two rods at the end of the summer, standing in the West Marine.

He only means to get one - something that’ll fit easily in the Bronco, work in a lot of different environments. Will makes an old hand-me-down spinning one work as best it can with small upgrades and a clever blue tacklebox, but it’s Beau’s and it’s old, and that makes Beau itch with the need to do better.

(*Another itch - the ride home from work on a Thursday morning, Will craning over the dashboard with a hounded look at the driver’s wheel, and you. You. With your hand over your sore eyes, and a lecture from your boss who likes you enough to keep you and likes you enough to just send you home for the day, saying “No more, Beau. This is a family business.” You agree of course, looking at your son who is missing second period and his lunch to do this. No one shafts you quite like family does.*)

“Anything you want,” he says with a straight face and a summer bonus lodged in his pocket so tightly that it probably actually *is* burning a hole in it. “Or somethin’ else if y’don’t want it at all. Books, binoculars, whatever the fuck makes you happy. You pick - jus’ maybe not a boat.”

Will's a thoughtful child, even at the edges of being a teenager. He turns things in hand, looks at price tags with frowns, and considers each as a man in front of his tools. Beau almost thinks he might refuse entirely, but something has his heart, and he'll at least look at it.

He lingers a long time between two - a practical travel pole, and unexpectedly, the long, featureless expanse of a cork-handled fly rod, too tall for a kid turning twelve and expensive besides.

Beau's never shown Will how to fly fish. Beau doesn't really care for it himself, but Beau knows what his son will choose to please him, so Beau takes them both from the wall even after Will circles back to the travel pole, Will shyly following after. Eight hundred and fifty dollars in one fell swoop, and five hundred of that earnestly wanted. He grumbles at the register, "You better use 'dis t' bring me back a trout or I swear I'll give you a good hidin'," and both of them smile, and it's never brought up again.

Beau can drink anytime. (*You will.*) He can afford to wait a month for something Will chooses instead of accepts.

(*You don't wait, but you can afford it anyway.*)

Beau's always been surprised how quickly knife injuries heal, like the skin and muscle are desperate to be close to something after the brief violence of being alone and taken apart. He's seen a few - Bremerton, Coronado, all the ports of the navy brushing up against the downtowns and poverty that Beau thought he might leave behind with his past. He's had a few - knife wounds and times of poverty. His life as a father has been marked by a need for money he used to swing between not giving a shit about, and resentfully working to have it, but never worked its way back to anything other than fishing knives.

(*"Bein' a parent changes you," says the neighbor in Biloxi, admiring Will's curls with warm fingers and perfectly kept nails that the wife of your boss in Sandusky never manages to match in diligence and honesty. "Your baby's what needs mindin'. You sort yourself out when n' where you can."*)

(*You'll need a knife to carve up a man in the future. It wasn't your man to carve, but again, needs drive.*)

He doesn't see Will's shoulder fully mend before Will's put a full tank of gas in his car and set Beau's things in the trunk, but he thinks of the red line hiding under tatty t-shirts. He hides it with closed bathroom doors, and discreetly takes antibiotics, like it shows a flaw the way Beau's drinking always seemed to show his. The physicality of a scar is too permanent for sharing - maybe not even with lovers, certainly not with fathers.

On the other hand, Will parts with his career like it doesn't wound him at all, a crisp acceptance letter to Tulane sitting pretty on the edge of the counter.

But maybe Beau shouldn't be surprised by this. Beau doesn't feel pain at the loss of any shop he's worked at, only the inconvenience of no forthcoming checks. The severance, overtime, sick leave, and vacation day payout will carry Will comfortably for a few years at least, but Will's good with money in a way Beau never has been, so Beau supposes that might not bother him either.

(*You remind yourself to be good though, even knowing it. You'll take the tab for a while. Fathers don't burden their children in school, or at least don't burden them with anything other than the inconvenience of a ride home, or to be the one call that you get before they lock you up for the night to sleep off whatever bad temper's taken you in its grasp. They have long fingers, those.*)

Beau watches Will check the dipstick of the old car from the front porch of the rental. It's a damp morning, the kind where the sea comes up in the air and takes it's time leaving, and all your clothes feel wet and watery like they'll rush out with it when it does. "You sure y'don't want me here no more? Who's gonna drink the handle in the fridge without me?"

"I'm sure I can take up your torch, though never your enthusiasm," Will snorts, and rolls a shoulder up to wipe his face without using his hands. Particular about grime on his hands, that boy. "I have one bad arm, so it only makes sense to have one bad kidney to match."

“You ain’t gonna wit’ that attitude. Y’ gotta blow out your liver first,” Beau replies, sips his coffee, and gets ready to drive. “S’ how I know I can go a bit longer.”

“Be sure to call me when you finally do,” Will says with a half-smile that’s half- hidden by the hood of the car. “Maybe that can be my thesis someday - the countdown to liver failure by volume of Crown Royal ingested by irritable old man.”

“Doesn’t sound like much forensics t’ me,” Beau shrugs.

“On the contrary,” Will says. “I think it sounds very much like forensics, just not the criminal kind. It’s how I expect to find you one of these days.”

Beau doesn’t really know how to reply to that, but fair’s fair, he guesses. It’s how Beau’s always expected to go.

They’re both glad when he leaves for Galveston, tired of stepping on each other’s toes, avoiding the tough questions while always trying to peek under each other’s bandages. Will was always better at it anyway. The mixed-fiber bench of the Bronco bends too much under his weight and itches the undersides of his legs, and Beau does his best to not watch the little shotgun house disappear with the street, and the freeway, and the green vined trees that hide each side of the bayous and other irritable old men in the country, their sons stuck like them, or long gone to other things.

Beau Graham has a boy that’s less of a boy than he is a man these days, and like many men that Beau has met, there’s always someone trying to stick a name on what he thinks, or how he feels, or what he should be doing to “better himself.”

Will has more faith in medicine than religion, and Beau’s slow descent back to the Southern states along the Ohio River to the Mississippi River to the Gulf once more means that there’s more of the former than the latter available to him.

“Autistic,” suggests the first school counselor Will agrees to see, in Cincinnati not long after he turns thirteen. He’s a self-assured person with no patience for Beau’s simple layman’s explanation of his son’s development, and even less for Will’s quiet aversion to answering questions. “Maybe a little hyperactive. I can recommend a psychiatrist for medications in the future, but I really recommend sports to get rid of some of that nervous energy.”

Will does a season of baseball, and suffers through the agony of a dugout full of young men who are restless with change, arrogance, and the strange externally motivated friendships of tribalism. He plays maybe four games in the entire series. The four he does, his teammates intentionally work to send him back to the bench. Will confesses on a drive home that there’s nothing he’d like so much as to see the star batter’s nose fall out the other side of his head from being beaten in.

Beau considers encouraging him to do it.

(*You would have. If you wouldn’t go to prison for it, you’d do it for him.*)

Will tells him he doesn’t want to play sports anymore. Instead, they give him adderall for the days and diazepam for the nights at the county clinic, and say this will fix him, and because Beau doesn’t know anything about it and hesitantly trusts Will’s care to them, he believes them.

(*No appetite, no desire to sleep, no desire to stop sleeping when he does, no stopping him from reading books, no remembering the books he read, or reworking the threads of a fly he’s learning to tie. No interest in talking to anyone, not even you. Instead of growing in bulk, he just grows taller and wiry and you bribe him with things that certainly aren’t dinner that he leaves in the cabinets with a thanks and a jittery flex of his fingers on the doorknob. Three months of that until he is wan and tired, and* ***still*** *he comes home one day and apes all your foul temper on a bad night. You flush the pills with that same temper, and yell at each other until exhaustion finds him in bed, and you back in your sweating glasses of whiskey. You don’t try anything else for a while - “maybe we’ll try sports again” you say when the clinic follows up and you have to pretend everything’s right as rain so they don’t call someone on you for depriving your son of something that’s not making him better.*)

“You said his mother was schizophrenic, right?” says the second person that Will agrees to see. They are in Memphis, and a Psychology program loosely associated with one of the universities is hungry for interesting patients, and the “well-being” of the community. “We have a psychiatrist on staff to help with treatment plans.”

It takes awhile to feel safe to try again. Will’s hesitant, and so is Beau, like mental health services are a stove that a hand falls on only once, but a neighbor in their new home is very happy with their care, and gives glowing recommendations. “Best thing I’ve done for my daughter,” she says. “She’s such a firebug,” she adds with a laugh like it’s not a big deal, everyone’s children have phases with burning down abandoned dilapidated houses, because that makes it smoother going down the throat - hers, not Beau’s. Beau nearly chokes at the idea of his Will being the same.

(*You don’t let Will spend time with her daughter. “Y’ain’t supposed to be alone wit’ young ladies,” you say. “Not a respectable thing for a t’ do.” You’re afraid he might pick up her bad habits, or unearth the ones that his momma left to him, like they’re an infection or a summer cold rather than an issue of breeding. You’re already afraid of what all he’s picked up from you, even as you try to be proud of it. Stoicism, handiness, independence, the impulse to see if you can crack someone’s skull on the counter to stop their stupid bitching.*)

(*Well, you’re not proud of that, but then maybe you are.*)

The organization is new, a whole new department to the Psychology program, and has plenty of funding for cases like Will’s. Misdiagnosed. Understudied. Very interested in inherited mental illness. *Very* interested in Will’s tendency to mimic. Beau very nearly balks at the forthrightness of this, almost excitement, at the prospect of treating a teenager with unusual mental behaviors, but the director listens to what Will says, and he entertains what Beau wants - teases with it, really.

“Normalcy is gained by treating the symptoms, and we just don’t know what all of Will’s are right now. Would you be willing to come in every week for sessions? Just a few cognitive tests and some observations - it’s always healthy to talk to someone not in the middle of your daily stress. You’d be compensated for your son’s time, of course.”

Beau's gut says no, it smells off, but Beau's boy says yes, he thinks that would be alright. Will has no extracurriculars here in Memphis after school, and a bus ride to the university is better than a walk home to the empty apartment.

"We wanted help, and here's help," Will says over the counter and a to-go burger when they get home. "No medications. Twenty bucks a visit with bus fare." He says this like someone resigned to swallow their cough syrup, but at fourteen, Will can make some decisions for himself.

"If y'want," Beau grumbles, and drinks Diet Coke from a straw, and more blended whiskey from a chipped rocks glass when the occasion calls after midnight. Chipped from biting, like he needs something to chew the way anxious dogs chew at themselves.

(*Healthy, they say and promise, just like you wanted for your son, but you didn't think you were doing so bad to mandate appointments for months at a time. "Gather around!" the experts shout from their podiums, "see how deficient poor sons of poor sons are at responsible child rearing!" and they would, and instead of your son on display, it's you, chewing at a bridle, never graceful in your shame.*)

It goes for four months. Four hundred bucks in Will's pocket, and as far as Beau understands, that's the only thing of value to come out of the entire thing. Sixteen sessions billed to the state of Tennessee, sixteen opportunities for sharks to circle looking for something mighty fine to eat.

They try to call him of course - additional permissions, appointment reminders, wanting to "review progress and challenges" like the god damned challenges can be resolved with a quick chat instead of the fourteen years of work that the challenges have been. Beau's not at home to receive these calls, and Beau's not the type to tempt fate with answering machines, so Beau doesn't say anything. Come to find out later, Will can't consent to the things they're considering doing - shock therapy, drug trials, cross-discipline experiments that make for nice papers but not very happy sons.

But they make a strong effort to do so regardless.

(*You'll come to find in a decade or two the worst of the damage was here - not anything you did, discounting the fact you're a sorry bastard with acid for a tongue, you can't stay in one place to save your life, and you won't hold back your vicious mouth to save his. You're ashamed that you're relieved to hear it, someone else's name to swear damnation to, but someone* ***worse*** *than them and you is coming soon enough, and Will brings that one on himself.*)

(*The way that all bad things are brought on yourself - you meet someone. You like them.*)

It's not as obvious that Will is unhappy this time compared to the medications. He's withdrawn, but Will *is* withdrawn - that's genetics, or learned, and it's been a long time in its development. He's irritable the way that Beau is irritable, but not the mirroring kind. Will gets into the habit of answering everything like he's fencing, looking for context where there isn't any with Beau. "I ain't got no quarrel with you, son," he says, clinking ice against his teeth to finish his drink. "Gotta save my strength for real problems," and Will sneers at that, and says nothing.

"How's the doctor?" Beau will sometimes ask.

"Fine," Will says with a frown.

"How's the clinic?" Beau will sometimes ask.

"Still standing," Will says with the kind of look that wishes it wasn't.

(*Neither of you call it therapy. You because you can't bear to say it. Him because it's not very therapeutic.*)

Every Thursday for the better part of the fall it continues, until one day Beau comes home early and sees Will sitting on the couch with nothing in hand and his backpack thrown to the side.

“How’s the doctor?” Beau asks, and Will, not inclined to be upset in front of people, just says with watery eyes that he didn’t go, and he doesn’t think he will anymore.

No harm no foul, says Beau, they don’t have any money in it, and no point in doing something that doesn’t work anyway.

They go out on the river that weekend instead, and Will catches nothing with his new flies, but his eyes clear up and he doesn’t take every question as an act of aggression, and that’s better than whatever it is that was promised to them. The spanish moss grows thick on the branches of the trees at the water’s edge, the mockingbirds sing, and Beau misses the salt of the ocean. Those promise nothing but familiarity.

Will stays in New Orleans for the entirety of his college undergraduate.

“Just convenient,” he says at Thanksgiving. He doesn’t come visit, because he’s working on a grant, but it wouldn’t have made sense anyway. Too long of a drive for a four day weekend. Too expensive to fly. Adult child relationships in a nutshell, says the bartender at Beau’s favorite haunt, a young man not too far off from Will’s age.

“Suit yourself,” says Beau with a shrug from the other side, scratching at the side of his face where his beard is coming in more grey than brown these days.

“I am,” says Will.

Beau doesn’t stay put because he never does - he moves from Galveston to back east in Fort Lauderdale, and back west to Gulfport. He adopts a dog despite this, some lazy old bloodhound that a friend says isn’t good for much other than eating and sleeping. This

pleases Beau - he's not good for much else either, and it's not alcoholism if you're drinking with a buddy, and a shiny brass tag at the dog's neck names him to be one.

It turns out it's not any harder to move a dog over state lines than sons were. If anything, it's substantially easier. There are no school districts to call, or forget to call - by age fifteen, Will got into the habit of checking in on that himself. He doesn't need a second bedroom for a growing boy that sprouts up tall, not as tall as Beau, not as wide as Beau, but needs to be by himself more and more. An old couch cushion is a sufficient bed. A coffee can he's sawed in half is a water and food bowl. Buddy costs a little bit - some ear drops and the kibble, but not much else, and the part of Beau's mind that he allows rare guilt to fester in wants to call his son and apologize for insisting otherwise.

Beau's not the type to call though - not without the drunk tank, or the county sheriff trying to get a straight answer on where Beau lives and Beau can't remember through the haze of a rough night, or Will's birthday. Will's the one that calls, when he wants to, or when he feels he has to for the card holidays. Even after retiring from the force, there's not much to talk about. Beau doesn't care much about corpse fly mating and egg laying, Will doesn't care much about shrimping not being very good this year.

Will does visit once in a while when Beau's in Gulfport. No reason not to, such a short drive from New Orleans, and what's Father's Day without some niggling reminder of his daddy? What could be better than the genuine article of Beau Graham, the original Christ's thorns shoved on his son's head with his elderly dog that he never tells his son about?

Will jumps out of his car - a little pickup truck that does ok, not amazing. Water damaged from Katrina but still runs because Graham men have time for things like that, but not each other. When the dog bays at him, Beau can't really decide if what he sees is shock, envy, or joy.

Maybe something of all three, split between each of them, because empathy disorders don't discriminate for filial visits.

(*And how **long** it took to get that name for what Will does, and how little it ended up meaning to you. Will learns to wear it like he's open-carrying, but you don't think of it often. He's your son. That's just how he is, the way that you're the way you are.*)

“When did you get *him*?” asks Will, rubbing at the long ears, accepting the sloppy affections of the dog better than he accepts most others. “You lose a bet or something?”

“Neighbor was gettin’ rid of ‘em,” says Beau. “Reckon their reasons why sounded like good reasons t’ get rid o’ me, and us ol’ flea bitten types gotta stay together.”

“Two long in the tooth animals up to no good?”

“He at least has the sense t’ not pretend at greater usefulness.”

Will rubs the back of the dog’s hindlegs. He talks at the dog through the majority of their conversations, and makes up opportunities to sit closer to him. He has gentle, yearning hands, the kind that cling to the corners of old single-wides, wanting to come closer but obediently certain he shouldn’t. Will doesn’t seem angry, even after he learns the dog has lived with Beau for close to a year now, but there’s a thoughtfulness in his face that smacks of thinking, and none of that has ever done Will any good.

Beau wonders if he didn’t do a sin by Will.

Not the neglecting to tell him about the dog of course, and maybe not even the steady refusal to get one while he was growing up, but instead if he didn’t need more than shelter and food and the basics that let him go walk with all the other schools of fish in the shape of people. Fathers are a strange concept to him, one dyed in the cloth of abandonment. Brothers are unknown to him. Co-workers don’t embrace. What is the taste and smell of affection between men? Beau doesn’t pretend to know.

(*You did as much and more than you recognized. You know it’s not enough, but you hope you can be forgiven it someday.*)

The next time Beau talks to him - 4th of July, federal holiday, no labs open, no grants to be accepted - Will has a dog of his own. He’s a little runty thing with soft ears and short legs, and he’s starving when he comes from the ship boneyards off Almonaster Avenue and Will is content with him in a way he can’t be with people. There’s no risk in loving a dog.

(*You hope you can be forgiven for making him vulnerable to someone who will know how to weaponize affection, and he will be wise enough despite your foolishness to know what he wants done about that.*)

"And you, my father, *'here on the sad height* ," Beau bellows in the depths of a dive bar, surrounded by people in love with the idea of home, "curse, *bless me now* wit' your fierce tears, I pray."

Beau Graham has a boy - he's had one for more than a decade and a half, and it gets more lived in every time he tells someone. He's had time to stretch the words, and see how they fit behind his teeth. It seems like they're going to continue to, no matter the number of times he's worried he's fucked him up, or someone was going to take him away for the sin of not intrinsically knowing how to fix himself long enough to fix his son. People are less surprised by it now. Grey old man Graham, head half in a bottle and his teenaged son just trying to survive his way to college admissions.

Beau would like to say that the scant years that lead up to Will's high school graduation are well spent and happy, but Will's growing dependability turns into a boon and a curse, and sometimes Beau wishes Will would have just left him behind. Sixteen year olds can legally drive and check themselves out of school in those days. They look old enough to buy cigarettes, and young enough to beg the good graces of older men who recognize the likes of Beau Graham as being a cross instead of a guard, and Will carries him regardless.

He's going to leave soon, probably.

That's ok, Beau tells himself. Beau was long gone by eighteen. He was long enlisted by twenty. His sensitive child is the type to learn by example and avoid what he's seen, and Will's too smart to make Beau's mistakes.

(*You think so. You resent it, that he's grown smarter than you to protect himself, but you think so, and that's for the best.*)

The tributary of the Mississippi River brings them back to known waters but new land, Baton Rouge full of tall bridges, and the smoking refineries, and the sleepy heat of a Louisiana summer. Will bags groceries after classes, and reads chemistry books after dinner that he brings home with him, and learns he should lock the door if he doesn't see Beau before 9 pm. He doesn't try to make acquaintances in the trailer park - they all watch out for each other, solidarity in their transience and austerity, but they're not friends.

The two of them don't talk about therapy options this year, not even when the high school counselor becomes insistent on it.

(*"You're the parent, you should tell him he needs this," she says, and you sneer and reply "According to all of you, who doesn't?"*)

Baton Rouge pushes them back out - they drive through New Orleans and Biloxi like driving through molded photographs where the bricks of some buildings seem eaten away with memory, and the reeds have grown taller around the spots they think they know, but they try not to stop anywhere, not even to look at old houses. The little birthday cards from the Fuseliers stopped this year, and Beau doesn't look into it because sixteen is old enough to stop expecting them. The overpasses will still be dirty. The summer still smells like rot.

They land themselves instead in Pascagoula by the shipbuilding yards, and stay on a houseboat off Bayou Casotte, and can pretend at familiarity between two hometowns - Will's birthplace to the west, and Beau's to the east in Mobile. It's uncomfortably close to both and that magnetic pull that's less physics and more the need to look when driving past an accident, only both belong to them.

Ghosts are hard to shake off, even ones you don't remember very well. Will makes assumptions about them, good ones, but Beau never wipes any of the dust off them or makes them clearer. He supposes he couldn't expect his son that seems to always know what people were thinking wouldn't ask about them, but like a lot of things these days, Beau hopes.

"You know I know about mom, right?" Will asks one evening, long white legs hanging off the sides of the dock and the lights of the houseboat lit from within in yellow incandescents.

Beau can’t see Will’s face when he says this. They never bother to replace the lights that mark their part of the dock - they know well enough where they’re walking, and the extra brightness will attract mosquitoes besides.

Beau takes a drag on a cigarette, and switches the hand he holds it in. He counts to ten, holding the air in. It’s been a long time since the last time Beau coughed from smoking. He doesn’t now.

“S’ hardly a secret,” Beau says slowly, smoke coming out with it. “S’ not the kind o’ thing you talk about though.”

“If it’s hardly a secret, then it seems kind of silly to act like it didn’t happen,” Will replies, and skims a heel on the water, arms crossed.

This makes Beau’s skin itch - enough so he raises a hand to swat at it, the implication and the words. Theirs is a relationship of avoidance when they’re not in conflict. Beau wonders what the conflict is today. "So what, you want me t’ go around crying ‘bout it? Wouldn’t do no good. Wouldn’t even change things fer’ you.”

Will lets that sit for a few minutes, and both listen to the water lapping at the edges of their little temporary home. Beau tries to let it go out with the tide, and think of other less complicated things.

They’re having canned chili burritos tonight. They’ll have whatever’s easy tomorrow. It’s senior year and Will doesn’t do much other than study, and the money’s good enough this time around that Beau doesn’t push for more, but maybe if he’s going to sit at home and find things to be unhappy about when so many come unbidden through the front door, maybe it’s time for another part-time job.

Will turns his head.

“You know...you know how I can understand people, but sometimes I understand you the least,” he says.

Beau doesn’t know if that’s a relief or a disappointment.

“Good,” he says instead of thinking about it, flicking the cigarette into the bayou’s dark water. “A rare mystery fo’ a know-it-all. You don't need t' know 'bout me the way I do," he adds, voice caught between vertebrae, trachea, and almost twenty years of coasting through ignorance. “Bad enough that you guess.”

But they both know, not because Beau is empathetic, and not because Will is, that the question is rooted somewhere.

(*Will your practical son do the same thing she did? Will adulthood come for him the way that it came before? You’ll be fine because you’re always fine, on any shore, at any body of water which you are made of and born to flow and disperse through like some sea creature riding waves. You’re not always sure if he will. He doesn’t disperse. He collects, and he has actively avoided collecting you, and you’re afraid with that he has forgotten to collect enough of your anger to live in spite of everything.*)

“Just ‘cause you can understand it don’t mean it’s y’all’s business. Some things better off not bein’ y’all’s business,” Beau says, and prays that sounds like good advice.

Will disagrees. Will disagrees so much that he graduates high school and makes an entire career of making other people’s business his own. He moves himself to New Orleans like a dare, and invites Beau to visit like a threat.

“I’m going to be a police officer,” he says in the kind of tone that suggests he thinks he’s going to be struck, or sworn at.

(*You consider it. Your father did it often enough to you.*)

“You’s a grown man,” Beau says instead at that thought. “You should do what y’ think’s right.”

Maybe that’s just how it is. The same way Beau ends up in the Gulf of Mexico near to Mobile, over and over again, maybe Will is going to end up at the edges of it as well, near to his mother-city which doesn’t remember him but takes him back like throwing a catch into saltwater it knows.

He doesn’t make the high school graduation, but he does make the academy one six months later, where the bright eyes and big white toothed smile he fancies he loved in his wife and knows that he does in his son look brilliant against the dark navy of a uniform, hair shorn to the sides of his head and hardly recognizable as that quiet thing he got so used to saving from the reality of life being unkind, only to be unkind himself.

(*Consistency, you were told, is what’s missing. Routine. Order. Drifters and contract chasers don’t make good guardians, and Will weathers you as well as any storm despite this. Maybe he wanted those things all along, and he now thinks the promise of law and justice will fill that gap for him as an adult, bring him closer to the side of himself that feels missing. You don’t want to be the asshole that tells him law and justice together is oil and water, but you think it. Oh, you think it and hope he reads* ***that*** *in your face for the first time since you realized he knew how to do that.*)

(*The side of him that’s missing is just a girl with bad circumstances, and millions like her are happening every day, and you just don’t want him to hurt himself learning that.*)

They offer drinks at an open bar - Will’s too young to imbibe in the state of Louisiana, so he doesn’t, and because Beau is proud of him and figures he shouldn’t spend his first night on the job having to do what he’s going to spend the next several years doing, Beau doesn’t drink, and doesn’t need to be bailed out for being what he is.

They send a picture to the both of them from the ceremony. It could be a family portrait - all three of them, the absent ***her*** somewhere between a dimpled cheek and the missing curly brown hair that Beau sees even if it was long since shorn away.

The knife wound, like the cities they leave behind, is forgotten with each consecutive move away from it, like it's a point fixed in time instead of a scar that marks the end of Will's optimism in people, and how effective he is in helping them. A bachelor's and two masters later, Beau doesn't know if Will is closer to the next fixed point where that's different.

A few things do change, fortunately. The little rental in New Orleans is turned over for an apartment in Arlington, Virginia, and at the end of nearly ten years, an actual house in the suburbs west of that. Beau celebrates the hooding ceremony, but mostly he celebrates this, the most tangible sign of Will's success from single-parent childhood to academic professional. Property, permanence, a little creek for his pretty flies that have only gotten better with age, and a short drive to the nearest marina off the Potomac. There are three dogs now, and they are well-fed and warm, a happy frenzy atop all the things Will likes best by no effort other than his own.

Will's not the type to brag, but Beau's told by a faculty member that Will is well-published and well-respected, like this means more than the house and all those small things. Beau doesn't think the man really understands relative value, or at least not the way Beau does.

(*You're published too, you tell him with a smile and a snort from your son - in the county arrests online, which is convenient, because now you can just look them all up at once instead of fishing around your house for papers that never survive the next move. You don't explain that part, and neither does he, but less out of embarrassment and more in the spirit of a good inside joke.*)

"He never do shut up 'bout bugs," Beau says and claps him on the bad shoulder, and Will doesn't even flinch at it.

"Made an entire career on it," says his principal investigator, a kindly man with greying temples and glossy black hair that acts like Will is his son instead of Beau's. Erudite, soft handed. "They'll be using his monograph as the new standard, I'm certain of it. Now we just wait to see if he does it through the university or the feds, right Will?"

Will shyly nods, avoiding Beau's eyes behind glasses that Beau's never seen before.

Beau says nothing, but it follows him through the rest of the night, from toasts to another photo where the two of them are looking more like each other year over year. Too bad for Will, Beau tells a friend later when they remark on it. It follows him to the nearly barren guest bedroom, and awkward goodbyes on the front drive, and down the highway to Georgia, where he and his most recent dog are taking up space. It follows him to the porch and to the bed there. It rests briefly in a bottle between those.

Beau considers his cell phone - a gift, "so I can find you," Will says.

He wants to tell him *remember last time, remember. Don't let those people take advantage of your soft heart. Don't let them take what you've carved out for yourself. Don't be like me, even if you're more than you used to be, and I brought that on you with prayer.*

He doesn't of course. Grown people with houses don't need their daddies telling them how to spend their best years, and Beau doesn't know if he would even recognize which ones were his own if asked.

Good luck, he texts instead on the day of Will's FBI exam date.

Thanks, Will replies before failing it.

Happy Birthday, comes the next one, months later. They talk in between, but not much - enough, the two of them would hazard.

Thanks, Beau replies before drinking through it, and lets the march of a couple years in Savannah by himself with a blue tick hound and a nest of seabirds in his trees keep him in place for a while. His son's got the tab on the cottage, and Beau's not the type to waste.

There's obligate calls, a couple summer weekends together. But mostly this - the careful asking and replying of animals grown too large to share a cage anymore. That's alright. That means they're only talking when they want to. Beau hopes Will knows even if they're not talking, he's in his thoughts, and maybe Beau is in his.

He’s so used to this kind of radio silence that he doesn’t really question it. He’s not the type to read newspapers either, so he doesn’t question that either.

(*You miss all the excitement. You miss the biggest monster coming into the harbor, a man like you that can move and let the water slide off of themselves for new ones. You never even know the worst thing that could happen to your boy happens until he’s texting you in the early hours of a February morning while you’re pulling your socks up and your coat on for a shift in the port, and a part of you is glad for it. You wouldn’t share your trauma with him - it’s fair he doesn’t have to share his.*)

Thinking of your crab boats and having a smoke, comes the message.

Not Will’s kind of hours, Beau thinks. Or maybe they are. Beau doesn’t pretend to know Will anymore than Will pretends to know him, no matter how close to the grain he might be. But he feels the greasy remnant of a bad memory in it, the plastic of a rotary phone trying to rattle it’s way into making Beau answer.

(*You don’t know if he’d call you if he needed it these days. You hope he would. You go to work. You pay the bills you can. You let your dog out in intervals, and tell your son when you want to disappear, and where to, and when you’ll be seen again. So maybe you grew up a little in the last ten years, while he’s been struggling through nearer every year to forty of them.*)

Sounds like a good morning, he replies quickly before he forgets with clumsy fingers, a little stiff and cold today. ***You doing ok, boy?***

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